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Word melodies vs. pitch accents: A perceptual evaluation of terracing contours in British and Nigerian English

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Abstract

The results of a perception experiment in which Nigerian English listeners judged the well-formedness of Nigerian English intonation contours suggests that the language has tonal specifications for each syllable, including syllables that are unstressed in British English. The association of pitch accents to accented syllables in British English explains why British English listeners are relatively insensitive to deviations in the pitch of unstressed or unaccented syllables.

Index Terms: perception, intonation, word melody, pitch accent

I. Introduction

The terracing intonation pattern is given as the ‘core [intonation] pattern’ of Nigerian English by [1]. Descending series of pitch peaks were first described for African languages as ‘downdrift’. Later, this concept was merged with what was then termed ‘downstep’, the lowered pronunciation of a H-tone relative to a preceding H-tone without an intervening pitch valley [2; 3]. The term ‘downstep’ is now applied to the ‘staircase’ type as well as to downstepping contours with low valleys between the steps. This is particularly appropriate for Nigerian English, where the descending steps may or may not be interrupted by low pitches due to function words intervening between the lexical words which form the steps. In our interpretation, the contour is due to a tone grammar as formulated in [4] according to which each lexical word receives a H-tone and each function word a L-tone. In terms of the typology in [5, ch. 3], in which tones come as (a) word melodies, (b) pitch accents, and (c) boundary tones, the Nigerian tones are monotonal word melodies, which spread through the words they come with. Since they are single tones, no direction or edge needs to be specified. The crucial aspect here is the word domain: the pitch will change at any boundary between a lexical word and a function word (from H to L) and between any two lexical words (from H to a lowered H). Graphically, the downstepping pattern is shown in (1). We assume that the syllable is the tone bearing unit, as it is in indigenous languages like Ibibio. The last target represents the merged pronunciation of spread H and the boundary L%, which marks declarative intonation.

II. Experiment I: Nigerian English

II-A. Method

In order to test Nigerian listeners’ sensitivity to (a) the L-toned status of function words and (b) the location of the pitch change at word boundaries rather than at specific syllables within words, a corpus of twelve sentences was composed with three naturally accentable words, referred to as W1, W2 and W3. One or two unaccented function words are specified for tone through pitch accents and intervening syllables remain unspecified for tone, resulting in a looser connection between f0 and stretches of unaccented syllables.

(2)

The function words in (2) can alternatively be pronounced with low pitch in BrE. The variable here is phrasing: an intonational phrase (IP) boundary after It’s a case will typically attract an initial %L boundary tone before unaccented of.

The purpose of the experiment was, first, to provide evidence for the word melody status of tones in the grammar of Nigerian English and of the specification of tone to every syllable, as shown in (1). A second purpose was to provide evidence for the typological difference between Nigerian English and British English, in which only accented syllables are specified for tone through pitch accents and intervening syllables remain unspecified for tone, resulting in a looser connection between f0 and stretches of unaccented syllables.

In British English (BrE), terracing contours have been described as having the ‘stressed syllable of each accented word a step lower in pitch’ [6, p. 37] and as having ‘inter-accent’ descending level pitches [7, p. 160]. The insensitivity of the F0 contour to words boundaries was expressed in [8, p. 1] by the adoption of the ‘foot’ from David Abercrombie’s work on rhythm [9], which consists of ‘one salient syllable [plus any] non-salient or weak syllables’ (where ‘salient’ can be interpreted as ‘pitch accented’). In autosegmental phonology, the continuation of the pitch from initial boundaries or accented syllables to following accented syllables has been described as the simultaneous occurrence of a leftmost and a rightmost target (‘double alignment’ [5, p. 153; p. 302]).
Five speakers of standard Nigerian English were asked to read out the corpus in a neutral and quiet voice at least twice. They were recorded using an Olympus VN-2100PC Digital voice recorder in the second author’s office. From these recordings we selected two speakers, one male and one female, whose recordings were technically the best and contained complete sets of sentences. Subsequently, we selected one reading of each sentence from the recordings by each of these two speakers. In general, speakers read the sentences in a careful, deliberate style. In about a fifth of the cases we decided to shorten pauses between words. The selected readings were annotated with the help of Praat [10]. Employing conventional segmentation practice, we identified the CV-boundary of the first syllable of W1, the first function word, W2 and W3, as well as of the main stressed syllable of W3. (Recall that in the case of W1 and the first function word, W2 and W3, as well as of the main stressed syllable of W3, the first syllable is also the syllable with word stress.)

In order to test two specific aspects of the well-formedness of the NigE contour given in I, we decided to produce four artificial f0 contours on each of the 24 selected utterances produced by the two speakers of NigE and on each of the three selected utterances produced by the speaker of BrEng. Using the Psola resynthesis function in Praat, the f0 of the ‘terrace steps’ for W1, W2 and W3 was 270 Hz, 230 Hz and 200 Hz for the female speakers and 170 Hz, 135 Hz and 110 Hz for the male speaker, for all utterances. In versions (a) and (c), the f0 of W1 continued across the function word(s), while in versions b and d, the f0 dropped to 180 Hz at the CV boundary of the (first) function word, from where it continued to a point 60 ms to the left of beginning of the rhyme of W2. Versions (a) and (b) had a pitch drop after W2, causing the part before the main stress of W3 to be lower in pitch than W2, while versions c and d had this pitch drop at the main stress of W3, causing the pitch of the first part of W3 to be the same as W2. The f0 of the periphery of all sentences, i.e. everything to the left of CV1 minus 60 ms and everything to the right of CV5 plus 60 ms, was left unchanged. All pitch rises and falls were produced in 60 ms. Figure 2 shows the pitch contours used in the resynthesis of the four versions of It’s a case of late assimilation. This procedure led to the generation of 4 \times 12 (sentences) \times 2 (speakers) or 96 stimuli produced from NigE source utterances, plus 4 \times 3 (sentences) or 12 stimuli produced from the BrE source utterances, or 108 stimuli in all.

**II-B. Procedure**

An audio-cd was prepared containing the 108 stimuli in a random order. Each stimulus was preceded by a 200 ms bleep and an 800 ms pause, and followed by a 3.7 s response period. Four fillers occurred at the beginning of the test and two at the end. The audio-cd was played over loudspeakers in a large room in the Department of English at Uyo University. Judges were given the task to rate each stimulus for the degree to which it conformed to the speech of an educated speaker of Nigerian English when reading a sentence as a radio newscaster or university teacher. They gave their judgements on a printed answer sheet immediately after hearing the stimulus by ticking one of the five boxes numbered 1 to 5, where ‘5’ represented...
‘very good’ and ‘1’ represented ‘very poor’. On their answer sheets, each five-point scale was preceded by a written version of the corresponding sentence to help judges to keep the place. Twenty judges, twelve male and eight female, were recruited from the population of students and staff at the department. They had different language backgrounds, and their ages and their self-declared proficiency level in Nigerian English varied, as shown in II.

### TABLE II

First language (L1), self-declared frequency of use of Nigerian English (NigE: 1=always, 2=often, 3=rarely), age group older) and gender of 20 Nigerian judges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L1</th>
<th>NigE</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Annang</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Annang</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Igbo</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Igbo</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
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<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Igbo</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ocholo</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ocholo</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Igbo</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Pulgin English</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>&gt; 36</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3. Acceptability scores by 20 Nigerian listeners for four artificial F0 contours (I: high function word, low first part of W3; II: low function word, low first part of W3; III: high function word, high first part of W3; IV: low function word, high first part of W3) for the three prosodically distinctive parts of the third word (A: unaccented first and stressed second syllable; B: stressed first syllable; C: unstressed first syllable), significantly different from each of the other three contours (p<0.01 for I and III and p<0.05 for contour IV), and that additionally contour III is significantly different from contour IV.

### II-D. A speaker of British English

In order to see whether the preferences of the Nigerian listeners for the realization of Nigerian English intonation contours are exclusive to speech that is segmentally and rhythmically Nigerian English, a set of 12 stimuli was included which consisted of the four contours shown in Fig 1 superimposed on selected utterances of the sentences He’s a member of both associations. We start in late October and He saw his old employer as spoken by a 30-year old female speaker of English from England. An analysis of variance on the scores by the Nigerian listeners with Contour and Syllable type as factors yielded no significant effects. This finding suggests that the Nigerian intonational preferences as apply to Nigerian English, not to British English. Rather, these stimuli are marked down regardless of contour(a mean score of 2.46, well below the mean score for the Nigerian English speakers, 3.13).

### III. Experiment II: Nigerian vs British English

Phonologically, Nigerian English has syllabic tone: every syllable has a specification. There is no reason to assume that any syllables are phonologically privileged and thus phonetically more salient than others. British English, by contrast, has intonational pitch accents, which leave varying stretches of unaccented and/or unstressed syllables unspecified for tone. In this section, we consider the question whether Nigerian listeners show greater sensitivity to pitch on syllables which in British English are unaccented and/or unstressed than British English listeners. The hypothesis is that British English listeners will show little if any differentiation in their acceptability judgements of the four contours. To test this prediction, twenty-three judges were recruited from the student population of Queen Mary, University of London, 9 male and 14 female, 9 in the 18-20 age range and 14 in the 21-25 age range. They were told that they were going...
Contours were together significantly different from the other differences between any pairs, which means that two of the hoc Sidak comparisons for Contour showed no significant favorably to the British English speaker, who received a mean

Understandably, given the task, the British listeners responded favorably to the British English speaker, who received a mean score of 4.38, as against 3.05 for the Nigerian speakers.

IV. Discussion

The results confirm the hypothesis that the tonal grammar of Nigerian English requires F0 lowering for function words and downstepping at the word boundary. The results therefore support the analysis of the declarative contour in (1). The significant difference between contour III and the less acceptable contour IV shows that failure to lower for the function words is a more salient deviation from the norm than failure to downstep at the word boundary; no significant difference was found between contours I and III, which only differed in the location of the downstep on W3.

V. Conclusions

Nigerian English intonation is to be described as a word tone system, in which the tones are predictable: H for lexical words, L for function words. Phonetic implementation requires consecutive H's to be downstepped, regardless of intervening Ls. Quite unlike British English, which places pitch accents on words as a function of a number of grammatical and pragmatic factors, Nigerian English word melodies are inherent components of lexical representations. The observation that Nigerian English does not ‘deaccent’ or has ‘end stress’ is inappropriate to the extent that the notions ‘stress’ and ‘accent’ are inapplicable to the language. Its word tones are not simply negotiable the way pitch accents are in English.

VI. Acknowledgements

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